

The Thirty-Seven Practices of All the Bodhisattvas

by Gyalse Tokme Zangpo

Namo Lokeśvaraye!

You see that all things are beyond coming and going, Yet still you strive solely for the sake of living beings— To you, my precious guru inseparable from Lord Avalokita, I offer perpetual homage, respectfully, with body, speech and mind.

The perfect buddhas, who are the source of all benefit and joy, come into being through accomplishing the sacred Dharma. And since this in turn depends on knowing how to practice, I shall now describe the practices of all the buddhas' heirs.

1. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to study, reflect and meditate, tirelessly, both day and night, without ever straying into idleness, in order to free oneself and others from this ocean of samsara, having gained this supreme vessel—a free, well-favored human life, so difficult to find.
2. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to leave behind one's homeland, where our attachment to family and friends overwhelms us like a torrent, while our aversion towards enemies rages inside us like a blazing fire, and delusion's darkness obscures what must be adopted and abandoned.
3. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take to solitary places, avoiding the unwholesome, so that destructive emotions gradually fade away, and, in the absence of distraction, virtuous practice naturally gains strength; whilst, with awareness clearly focused, we gain conviction in the teachings.
4. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to renounce this life's concerns, for friends and relatives, long acquainted, must all go their separate ways; wealth and prized possessions, painstakingly acquired, must all be left behind; and consciousness, the guest who lodges in the body, must in time depart.
5. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid destructive friends, in whose company the three poisons of the mind grow stronger, and we engage less and less in study, reflection and meditation, so that love and compassion fade away until they are no more.
6. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cherish spiritual friends, by regarding them as even more precious than one's own body, since they are the ones who will help to rid us of all our faults, and make our virtues grow ever greater just like the waxing moon.

7. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to take refuge in the Three Jewels, since they will never fail to provide protection for all who call upon them, for whom are the ordinary gods of this world ever capable of helping, as long as they themselves are trapped within samsara's vicious cycle?
8. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to commit a harmful act, even though not to do so might put one's very life at risk, for the Sage himself has taught how negative actions will ripen into the manifold miseries of the lower realms, so difficult to endure.
9. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to strive towards the goal, which is the supreme state of changeless, everlasting liberation, since all the happiness of the three realms lasts but a moment, and then is quickly gone, just like dewdrops on blades of grass.
10. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to arouse bodhicitta, so as to bring freedom to all sentient beings, infinite in number. For how can true happiness ever be found while our mothers, who have cared for us throughout the ages, endure such pain?
11. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to make a genuine exchange of one's own happiness and wellbeing for all the sufferings of others. Since all misery comes from seeking happiness for oneself alone, whilst perfect buddhahood is born from the wish for others' good.
12. Even if others, in the grips of great desire, should steal, or encourage others to take away, all the wealth that I possess, to dedicate to them entirely my body, possessions and all my merits from the past, present and future— this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.
13. Even if others should seek to cut off my head, though I've done them not the slightest wrong, to take upon myself, out of compassion, all the harms they have amassed—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.
14. Even if others should declare before the world all manner of unpleasant things about me, to speak only of their good qualities in return, with a mind that's filled with love—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.
15. Even if others should expose my hidden faults or deride me when speaking amidst great gatherings of many people, to conceive of them as spiritual friends and to bow before them in respect—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

16. Even if others whom I have cared for like children of my own, should turn upon me and treat me as an enemy, to regard them only with special fondness and affection, as a mother would her ailing child—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

17. Even if others, equal or inferior to me in status, should, out of arrogance, disparage me, to honor them, as I would my teacher, by bowing down my head before them—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

18. Even though I may be destitute and despised by all, beset with terrible illness and plagued by evil spirits, still to take upon myself all beings' ills and harmful actions, without ever losing heart—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

19. Even though I may be famous and revered by all, and as rich as Vaiśravaṇa, the god of wealth himself, to see the futility of all the glory and riches of this world, and to remain without conceit—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

20. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to subdue the mind, with the forces of loving kindness and compassion. For unless the real adversary—my own anger—is defeated, outer enemies, though I may conquer them, will continue to appear.

21. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to turn away immediately from those things which bring desire and attachment. For the pleasures of the senses are just like salty water: the more we taste of them, the more our thirst increases.

22. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to entertain concepts, which revolve around dualistic notions of perceiver and perceived, in the knowledge that all these appearances are but the mind itself, whilst mind's own nature is forever beyond the limitations of ideas.

23. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to let go of grasping when encountering things one finds pleasant or attractive, considering them to be like rainbows in the summer skies— beautiful in appearance, yet in truth devoid of any substance.

24. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to recognize delusion whenever one is confronted by adversity or misfortune. For these sufferings are just like the death of a child in a dream, and it's so exhausting to cling to delusory perceptions as real.

25. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to give generously, with no hopes of karmic recompense or expectation of reward. For if those who seek awakening must give even their own bodies, what need is there to mention mere outer objects and possessions?

26. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to observe ethical restraint, without the slightest intention of continuing in saṃsāric existence. For lacking discipline one will never secure even one's own wellbeing, and so any thought of bringing benefit to others would be absurd.

27. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate patience, free from any trace of animosity towards anyone at all, since any potential source of harm is like a priceless treasure to the bodhisattva who is eager to enjoy a wealth of virtue.

28. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to strive with enthusiastic diligence the source of all good qualities--when working for the sake of all who live; seeing that even śrāvakas and pratyekabuddhas, who labor for themselves alone, exert themselves as if urgently trying to extinguish fires upon their heads.

29. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate concentration, which utterly transcends the four formless absorptions, in the knowledge that mental afflictions are overcome entirely through penetrating insight suffused with stable calm.

30. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to cultivate wisdom, beyond the three conceptual spheres, alongside skilful means, since it is not possible to attain the perfect level of awakening through the other five pāramitās alone, in wisdom's absence.

31. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to scrutinize oneself continually and to rid oneself of faults whenever they appear. For unless one checks carefully to find one's own confusion, one might appear to be practicing Dharma, but act against it.

32. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is never to speak ill of others who have embarked upon the greater vehicle, for if, under the influence of destructive emotions, I speak of other bodhisattvas' failings, it is I who am at fault.

33. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to let go of attachment to the households of benefactors and of family and friends, since one's study, reflection and meditation will all diminish when one quarrels and competes for honors and rewards.

34. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to avoid harsh words, which others might find unpleasant or distasteful, since abusive language upsets the minds of others, and thereby undermines a bodhisattva's conduct.

35. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to slay attachment and the rest—mind's afflictions—at once, the very moment they arise, taking as weapons the remedies held with mindfulness and vigilance. For once the kleshas have become familiar, they'll be harder to avert.

36. In short, no matter what one might be doing, by examining always the status of one's mind, with continuous mindfulness and alertness, to bring about the good of others—this is the practice of all the bodhisattvas.

37. The practice of all the bodhisattvas is to dedicate towards enlightenment all the virtue to be gained through making effort in these ways, with wisdom that is purified entirely of the three conceptual spheres, so as to dispel the sufferings of the infinity of beings.

Here I have set down for those who wish to follow the bodhisattva path, Thirty-seven practices to be adopted by all the buddhas' heirs, based on what is taught in the sūtras, tantras and treatises, and following the instructions of the great masters of the past.

Since my intellect is only feeble and I have studied but a little, this is not a composition likely to delight the connoisseurs, yet since I've relied upon the sūtras and what the saints have taught I feel these are indeed the genuine trainings of the buddhas' heirs.

Still, the tremendous waves of activity of the bodhisattvas are difficult for simple-minded folk like me to comprehend, and I must therefore beg the indulgence of all the perfect saints for any contradictions, irrelevancies or other flaws this may contain.

Through whatever merit has here been gained, may all beings generate sublime bodhicitta, both relative and absolute, and through this, come to equal Lord Avalokiteśvara, transcending the extremes of existence and quiescence.